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ABSTRACT

This brief paper tells the story of a group of high school students in West Texas who worked together to solve a language problem in their local public schools. They determined that there was a need to have better bilingual resources and services available to new arrivals with limited or no English language speaking ability. The bulk of the paper is a narrative of the efforts of several students to write their ideas into a successful grant proposal, which they then used to make their county a friendlier and more accommodating place for newly arrived, limited English speakers from Mexico. Numerous photocopied photographs appear throughout the text. (KFT)

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ED 446 436

Reflections on The Birth and First Year of ¡*Bienvenidos, Nuevos Amigos*!

A Service-Learning Project in Eldorado, Texas ¡999-2000

by Katrina Gonzales,
Project Sponsor

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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August 1999. School begins. Students return to classes, friends, and favorite teachers. Familiar scenes for most, but not for the newest characters in this setting. Imagine coming into a new community *and* a new school. Now, go further...throw in an unfamiliar language in a new country. A frightening proposition for a well-adjusted adult, much less an adolescent with normal feelings and fears. Who can't recall an incident in middle or high school of sheer embarrassment in which dying on the spot seemed like the best possible option?

No different from the typical adolescent student, the teenagers at Eldorado Middle School and Eldorado High School had experienced the best and worst of being a teenager, just like those in neighboring communities. But could those experiences benefit others? They thought so. Thus, the birth of *Nuevos Amigos* at Schleicher County I.S.D.

A beautiful, sprawling expanse of hills and ranchland 45 miles south of San Angelo, Texas, Schleicher County's only city is Eldorado. A small city populated with about 2,000 people and a county population at just over 3,000, "Welcome!" is possibly one of the first words taught to children in this small concentration of people. Predominantly Anglo and Hispanic, both cultures coexist and live to build the economy and culture of the city. With the Texas/ Mexico border only about 150 miles south of Eldorado, families from Mexico often leave their homes to start a new life here. Although there is both a proud and humble group of Hispanic people settled in the community, oftentimes, people moving here have difficulty when entering a student into the school system because of the language barrier. Staff in the school's four offices for the most part know little or no Spanish; thus, when a new family arrives, the race is on to pull the Spanish-speaking teacher out of class or to find the Hispanic custodian to serve as a translator. Invariably, complex questions

Main Street,Eldorado, Texas

often arise that are difficult to articulate when a common language is not accessible.

How It All Began

At the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year, a family entered two children into the school system. The family had arrived from Mexico and spoke minimal English. A senior student fluent in Spanish happened to be working as an office assistant. As she helped to register the new students, the family felt comfortable with her, and, consequently, the two boys explained some of their academic accomplishments in Mexico. The school principal and other staff were able to ask questions and explain school policies and procedures. A simple thing, really, but one that needed to be a permanent aspect of the system.

With the boys' registration complete, the student translator and the English-As-A-Second Language teacher visited about what had taken place. The student recalled her own experience as a little girl registering for school with her Spanish-speaking

mother. Wouldn't it have been easier if there had been someone there who spoke Spanish when she registered! Furthermore, why couldn't the paperwork be translated into Spanish? Two simple ideas born of a challenging exchange in the midst of a small group of people trying to do the best that they knew to do.

The senior student and the E.S.L. teacher determined that these needs must be addressed. With several other high school students, they decided to write a Learn and Serve America Expansion Grant. Upon the approval of the grant, surveys were given to both students and parents who had emigrated from Mexico in the past few years to Eldorado. Questions which pertained to the help they received when they arrived here and what they felt needed to be added to what was already being done helped to set the project's direction . Then, both the middle school and high school teachers received a survey asking them to identify several students who had bilingual skills, who were helpful to other students, and who could maintain or do better on their grades if they were in a special group designed to address the

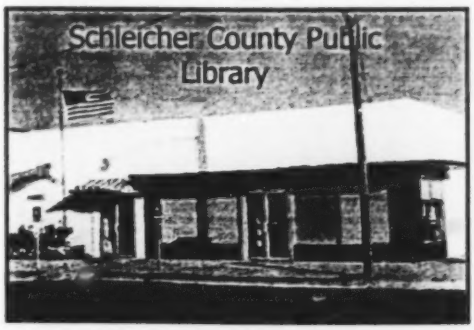
needs in our school that we had identified. 20 students at both the middle school and high school were selected. These students attended a specially designed, one-day training at the XBar Ranch, a nearby recreational ranching facility. After an intensive day of getting to know themselves and each other, the students had begun to form the beginnings of a family. On the bus trip back home, the students questioned the sponsor: "Just what *exactly* are we going to do now?" The answer wasn't what they expected or really wanted to hear..."It's up to ***you*** to decide how to go about addressing the situation and needs that you've identified." Thus, the work began.

The students worked hard to build trust in themselves and each other…

Success!

The Real Work Begins...

The students met weekly during an allocated period of time (Eagle Period which is a short, 25 minute study period). They began to develop ideas and a plan for accomplishing their goals. Extensive work for a short period of time per week, but they were fearless. They determined that the public county library needed more books in Spanish to offer to parents who loved reading but didn't read English. They decided that they would form a committee to speak to the librarian about their idea. Jeri Whitten, the county librarian, encouraged the students and agreed to allocate funds to buy books in Spanish. Previously, the library had only received Spanish language books on loan. In addition to acquiring a permanent Spanish collection, the group felt that the Spanish Literacy Corner should be dedicated to the mother of two of our



Nuevos Amigos members who had passed away early in the school year. Mrs. Carmen Esparza, the boys' mother, read passionately and encouraged her children to do the same. The corner was dedicated on January 17, 2000 with a public ceremony covered by the local television news and newspaper. More than fifty people attended the noon ceremony. The students had worked diligently to make the winter-time dedication memorable with hot chocolate and Mexican pastries served to the attendees. Of course, no one predicted the unseasonably warm weather in January, but all enjoyed the event and refreshments just the same.

Taking *Nuevos Amigos* to the World

In February, four senior students presented *¡Bienvenidos, Nuevos Amigos!* before a national audience at the National Association for Bilingual Education conference (NABE 2000) in San Antonio, Texas. These students' presentation brought the audience to their feet. Participants actually offered the four young women positions in school systems around the country. With bilingualism and its benefits as the focus of the conference, the experience changed

each of the girls' perspectives in meaningful ways. The students came back to our rural community knowing that what they were trying to accomplish in Eldorado was important business. Upon their return, the four student presenters shared their excitement with the local school board, as well as their fellow Nuevos Amigos members.

Children Celebrating Children

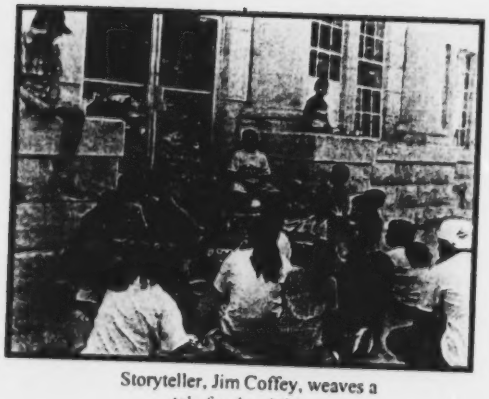
Beginning in November, the students discovered a celebration that they wanted to bring to our community---Día de los Niños, or Day of the Children. Celebrated in Mexico on April 30, a national effort to bring the holiday to the U.S. began in 1997 by the National Latino Children's Institute. We knew that if we wanted to bring this type of activity to Eldorado, work must begin months before the April event. The students decided that weekly meetings were not enough and that Thursday afternoons students would meet after school and plan the celebration. Even during the spring when teachers and students began to tire of school, several

students came ready to work. Anywhere from 2 students to 30 made the Thursday meetings. Their excitement contagious and their spirits unwavering, when the sponsors would worry that maybe we were over our heads, the students would simply say, "We can do it. No problem." And they were right. Despite some scheduling difficulties (the event was set back a week to May 1 due to a conflict), the celebration was a great success. At the peak of the day, over 400 people attended Schleicher County's first ever Día de los Niños! The Nuevos Amigos students worked from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm to create a wonderful Sunday afternoon for children and their families.

A Childrens' Parade Kicked Off the Día de los Niños Celebration

Ballet Folklorico Tejas
performs for a standing-room
only crowd

Local residents perform exciting
machete dances from their native
country of Guanajuato, Mexico



Storyteller, Jim Coffey, weaves a
tale for the children

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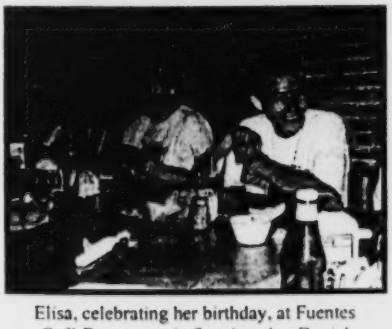
Another ambitious activity of *¡Bienvenidos, Nuevos Amigos!* provided bags to new families in our district that contained pertinent information about school in Spanish. Three students worked to translate the complicated language and educational jargon of the school district's handbook from English to Spanish. Three other students worked to create a welcome video in Spanish to place in the bags. The purposes of the video were to make the student and parent feel more comfortable about enrolling in the U.S. school and to familiarize them about the many differences of our school and the schools in Mexico.

Celebrations and Reflections

Service-learning projects must include celebration. The students in this project felt strongly about this facet of service-learning. By the end of the school year, the students realized that summer was upon us, and our time together was at an end for a while. One celebration led to another, then to another. "Just *one* more party,

Cinco de Mayo Presentation

please?" How could we as sponsors say "no" to this dedicated group of students? As we presented our project at the Cinco de Mayo celebration in San Angelo, a city 45 miles north of Eldorado, we once again had an opportunity for both reflection as well as celebration. One of our senior girls celebrated her birthday on this day. Of major significance to our group, Elisa Muñoz came to Eldorado from Mexico five years ago. Teachers honestly did not expect her to finish school here. She was miserable and refused to learn English. She persisted, however, and became a model for those with similar situations. She has plans to attend Angelo State University and become an English-as-a-Second Language teacher. Just one example of what *¡Bienvenidos, Nuevos Amigos!* accomplished for students in our school system.



Elisa, celebrating her birthday, at Fuentes Café Downtown in San Angelo. Daniel Mata, another member, is in the foreground.

Finally, in May, the school district held an employee appreciation dinner and the students of *¡Bienvenidos, Nuevos*

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Amigos! were asked to present their accomplishments once again before a local audience. Teachers who had previously taught the students presenters commented with amazement at how much confidence and poise the students possessed. The rolling ball was gathering speed and the students realized that nothing could stop it now. With accolades from surrounding communities and, more importantly now, from their local community, the students of *¡Bienvenidos, Nuevos Amigos!* were sure about one thing...they would be back as a group next year! Where would they go from here? No one knew for certain, but, one thing was sure, newcomers to Eldorado, and especially the school system, could be assured that "Welcome" could very well be "Bienvenidos" from this point on.

Heritage

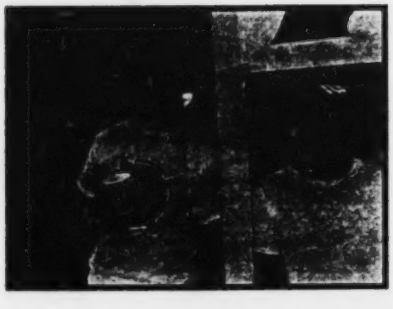
By Maria Guzman

Heritage is something special
It makes you who you are
From the way you live your life
Al idioma que vas hablar.

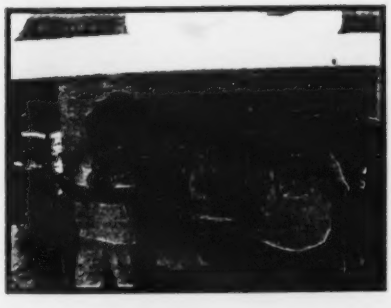
So hold on to your roots
Y no los dejes ir
Be proud of who you are
Y tu gente va vivir

Enseña a tus hijos
Que tengan orgullo de quien son
Habla de tu tierra
Habla de tradición

Learn to speak English
But don't forget your Spanish
God has blessed you with a gift
Don't let your language vanish



Somos una familia
We're a family
Y si necesitas un amigo
If you need a friend
That is where I'll be.



NOTE:
Maria Guzman was a senior this year and a member of Nuevos Amigos. She was the student who initially saw the need and discussed the possibility of doing something with her teacher. Her poem reflects both the importance of the preservation of culture that the group embraces, as well as the feeling of family that has captured each of us this year.

Several Nuevos Amigos members gather
in the beautiful Paseo de Santa Angela
in San Angelo, Texas

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